

MONTANA STATE TRAIL PLAN. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EXE Introduction

Montanans are passionate about trails, and for good reason. Montana's trails are a passport to some of the most beautiful places in the world, threads that link special places together, creating memories. Trails require effort, but they often reward it richly. They get people from one place to another, but on a more human scale than roads; trails are utilitarian, yet nearly synonymous in the minds of many with pleasure, joy, and adventure.

Residents and visitors alike place a high value on Montana's outdoor recreation, open space, natural areas, and historic sites. In Montana and throughout the country, trails are an increasingly important component of the public's enjoyment of outdoor resources and activities. Trails produce multiple benefits and significantly enhance quality of life by providing opportunities for outdoor recreation, protecting natural and cultural resources, and creating economic opportunities. Trails also provide alternative transportation routes that reduce pollution, as well as encourage participation in outdoor social, fitness, and educational activities.

Montana already has an impressive network of public trails, but it could be substantially improved. The *Montana State Trails Plan* is a first attempt to provide long-term, inter-agency direction for the statewide public trail system, including both motorized and non-motorized trails. The focus is on statewide, rather than local or trail-specific issues, with a primary emphasis on common values shared by most trail users, and areas of agreement within and between managing agencies and other interested parties.

The *Montana State Trails Plan* was coordinated by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) because it is the agency with statewide recreation management responsibilities. The *Trails Plan* is

not intended to usurp the management plans and planning processes used by the various federal, state, and local agencies which manage the state's trails. Rather, the Plan is meant to provide trail managers with information about the trail system and the people who use them, and produce strategic recommendations on trail issues and needs. The *Trails Plan* aims to enhance Montana's trail network by improving cooperation among agencies, organizations, and individuals; increase availability of funds; and provide a foundation for better meeting the needs of trail users.

In addition to the *Trails Plan*, a separate but related *Programmatic Environmental Impact* Statement (PEIS) was also completed for FWP's Trails Program. The Trails Program PEIS was done concurrently with the Trails Plan, with the intent of drawing on its recommendations to help analyze and improve two trail grant programs administered by FWP. The programs include motorized and non-motorized trail funding available through the federal Recreational Trails Program (RTP), and the State Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) Grant Program. Neither the Trails Plan nor the Trails Program PEIS address snowmobiling or the FWP Snowmobile Grant Program, as these were covered in a separate PEIS completed in 1993. Additionally, waterbased trails are not addressed in the Plan or PEIS, as this form of recreation is distinct enough to be dealt with separately.

For the purposes of this executive summary, "trail" will be defined broadly, as a public path, right-of-way, or other linear corridor used for outdoor recreation or alternative transportation; a more detailed definition is included in the complete Plan. The types of uses examined in the Plan are also broad, but the user groups represented on the State Trails Advisory Committee (STAC) and listed below reflect the types of recreation that are currently in highest demand.





It is worth remembering that trail-based recreation is constantly changing, and uses that were virtually unknown twenty years ago have become extremely popular in some areas (e.g., in-line skating). Trail uses represented on the STAC are as follows:

- Hiking
- · Off-highway motorcycling
- ATV riding
- Cross-country skiing
- Bicycling
- Back-country 4x4 driving
- Horseback riding
- Snowmobiling (not covered in this plan)

Many of the recommendations included in the *Trails Plan* were initially derived from comments received during the public scoping period. A total of 315 written comments were received, and more than 400 people attended one of the 18 public scoping meetings in Montana. A summary of the scoping period comments is included in the appendix of the full document.

In analyzing the information from the scoping period, an effort was made to capture all of the major issues and concerns that emerged. The scoping comments were condensed from an initial list of more than 90 issues to the fifteen issues included in the Plan. These issues were also used in helping develop the *Trails Program PEIS*.

Following the scoping meetings, a "workbook" was compiled for review by the STAC and a second technical advisory committee composed largely of staff from trail managing agencies. The workbook contained preliminary issues, goals, and strategies derived from the scoping sessions, with space for writing in comments and suggestions. The initial workbook was revised based on advisory committee comments, and released for public review. The recommendations which emerged from the public review workbook became the framework for the long-term direction included here.

The most recent step in the planning process was a public comment period on the draft Plan/PEIS,

which extended from August 1 to October 10, 2000, with informational open houses held in seven Montana cities. Additionally, there was a series of reviews by an interdisciplinary FWP Trails Advisory Committee, as well as representatives from other trail managing agencies. The drafts were revised based on the 325 public and agency comments received; a summary of the public review period is included in Appendix C, with a more complete overview of substantive comments and agency responses in the PEIS Appendix.

For questions about the Montana State Trails Plan/PEIS or the State Trails Grant Program, please contact the following:

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A Vision for Montana's Trail System

The long-term vision for future trail-based recreation in Montana is as follows:

Maintain and develop a trail system that is an integral component of outdoor recreation in Montana; that meets or exceeds user expectations; that provides a variety of readily accessible public trails, in a wide range of settings; and maximizes opportunities for a wide range of trail uses, while minimizing conflict and protecting natural and cultural resources.

More specific components of this vision (which is based on the primary concerns, issues, and goals derived from the public scoping process) are summarized as follows:

- * **DIVERSITY OF OPPORTUNITIES:** The trail system should offer sustainable recreation opportunities for a wide range of user types and abilities.
- * VARIETY OF SETTINGS: The Montana trail system should reflect the spectacular diversity of the state's natural and cultural environments, from urban to wilderness, forest to prairie, mountaintop to river valley, and ghost town to busy city center.
- * MINIMAL CONFLICT: The trail system should be managed in a way that reduces conflicts between users. Where there are conflicts, trail users and managers are encouraged to work together to solve them in an open and fair manner.
- * INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATION:
 The system should allow users to experience and learn more about a wide variety of the state's natural and cultural features. Trails can and should provide a means for interpreting Montana's natural and cultural heritage.

- * NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCE CONSERVATION: The Montana trail system should be designed and
 managed in a way that conserves and enhances Montana's natural and cultural
 resources. Trails that are improperly placed
 or occur too frequently across the landscape
 can create both social and natural resource
 impacts. Montana's trail systems and the
 resources they affect must be managed and
 maintained in a sustainable manner.
- * ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM: The Montana trail system should enhance the economic vitality of Montana's communities.
- * ACCESSIBILITY: Montana trails must be readily accessible to users. The Montana trail network shall include enhanced trail recreation opportunities within a short distance of where most Montanans live. More disabled accessible trail opportunities are also a priority.
- * INFORMATION: Montana trail users (as well as potential users) need to have better information about trail opportunities in the state, as well as information about safety, ethics, conflict reduction, and minimizing environmental impacts.
- * TRANSPORTATION LINKS: The Montana trail system should be closely integrated with the primary transportation network in the state and—where appropriate—provide alternatives to vehicular transportation.
- * COOPERATION: Planning and management of Montana's trail system should be a cooperative endeavor between local governments, state agencies, the federal government, private landowners, and trail users and user groups. This Plan is intended to stimulate discussion between managers and the full spectrum of trail users, helping them to organize more effectively, find common ground, gain a joint sense of purpose, recognize and act upon new opportunities, and collectively work together to improve and maintain Montana's trails.





Overview of Trails Plan Issues and Goals

The issues listed below represent the major problems or opportunities identified by the public and agency staff, as well as through research and surveys. A more detailed discussion of the issues, goals, and strategies is included in the last chapter of the *Trails Plan*.

1) ACCESS.

Explanation: Loss of access to public trails and failure to secure key corridors across various types of land ownership was one of the most important issues to emerge from the scoping meetings. In order to address this issue, federal, state, and local governments need to cooperate in officially documenting public easements and rights-of-ways, and purchasing land or easements where necessary.

Goal: Improved access to public trails and lands.

2) URBAN TRAILS.

Explanation: Urban areas have the greatest need for new trails, because most Montanans live in and around cities and towns. There is a strong demand for convenient recreation opportunities which people can enjoy on short notice. An important related issue is integrating trails with land use and transportation planning in urban areas. Rail-trails, greenways, and creating connections to surrounding public lands are important needs related to urban trails. The largest demand is for more non-motorized trails in urban areas.

Goals(s): 1) More local trails, greenways, and trail connections for recreation and transportation in, around, and between Montana's populated urban areas; 2) Develop urban trail linkages between residences, parks and other recreational facilities,

schools, historic and cultural sites, open space, shopping areas, and other important community destinations.

3) RESOURCE PROTECTION.

Explanation: Direct and secondary impacts on natural and cultural resources from trails and trail-related activities is a primary concern of trail users, as well as resource managers. Many users are concerned about the integrity of wild areas, and how they are impacted by trail activities. Impacts on wildlife resources are a critical concern (particularly during hunting season), as are noxious weeds. Resource impacts resulting from motorized trail-related use is a growing concern, particularly cross-country travel, use in off-limits areas, and illegal trail construction. Finally, the roadless areas where many of Montana's trails are found have been dramatically reduced in size during the past fifty years.

Goal: Reduced trail-related impacts on natural and cultural resources through avoidance and mitigation.

4) TRAIL SUPPLY AND SYSTEM CONFIGURATION.

Explanation: The supply and configuration of Montana's trail system was an issue that came up in a variety of ways during the initial scoping process. Trail data suggests that while the demand for trails has been increasing, the total number of backcountry trail miles in Montana has been declining for decades due to abandonment of old fire trails, road building, and other factors; there must be no further net loss of these routes. Because most Montanans live in towns and cities, meeting growing urban trail demands is critical. Other needs identified included additional loop and connecting trails, ensuring interesting trail-related destinations, and more trails in eastern Montana. A major challenge will be to provide adequate and varied trail opportunities for both motorized



and non-motorized trail users throughout Montana, while minimizing environmental impacts and conflicts.

Goal: A diverse trail system, for a wide variety of uses, in all parts of Montana.

5) FUNDING:

Explanation: There is insufficient funding to meet current demands, which are growing. There is an especially great need for improved non-motorized funding due to the large and increasing amount of non-motorized trail use, especially in and around urban areas. Motorized users have successfully pursued dedicated OHV and snowmobile funding sources through the Legislature, but there is no equivalent non-motorized source.

Goal: Improved trail-related funding at all levels of government; the demand for enhanced non-motorized funding is especially great.

6) MAINTENANCE.

Explanation: There is a backlog of maintenance needs throughout Montana, an issue closely related to insufficient funding. The biggest need in the backcountry is maintenance and completing loops and key connections, rather than a significant number of new trails. In the last decade, there have been substantial new trail projects in Montana's towns and cities, and these facilities will need to be maintained on an on-going basis. Volunteers will likely play an increasingly important role in meeting maintenance needs.

Goal: A Montana trail system that is maintained in a safe, attractive, and environmentally sound manner, with no net loss of mileage due to lack of maintenance or other causes. Maintenance levels should be appropriate to the amount and type of use the site receives, and reflects the type of experience trail users desire.

7) MANAGEMENT AND ENFORCEMENT.

Explanation: Many trail users who attended scoping meetings or submitted written comments believe enforcement of trail regulations needs to be improved. Trail users also had a wide variety of concerns about how trails are managed, often centered around motorized trail restrictions (e.g., loss of motorized access, resource impacts, etc.). Information and signing are important in ensuring compliance with restrictions and regulations. Design, construction, and maintenance of trails should complement management goals and trail use restrictions.

Goal(s): 1) Trail management processes that consider all important issues, actively involve the public throughout the process, and entertain a range of management alternatives; 2) Improved enforcement of trail regulations, and a reduced need for enforcement by improving the behavior of all trail users.

8) USER CONFLICT AND COMPATIBLITY.

Explanation: Trail users have differing opinions on what trail uses are compatible. Conflicts generally result from feelings of incompatibility, but can also result from the perception that a trail user is unsafe or displaying poor etiquette. Most conflicts are between mechanized and non-mechanized trail uses. A key to reducing conflicts is ensuring that users have accurate information about what uses are permitted on particular trails.

Goal: Reduced user conflicts and increased compatibility between trail users.

9) SAFETY AND LIABILITY.

Explanation: The need to design trails to improve safety and reduce liability is increasing with the growing amount of recreation-related litigation. Safety and liability are of special concern for urban trails and other high use trails. Providing current informa-





tion on safety concerns and informing trail users of the risks inherent in trail use are key to addressing this issue.

Goal: A safe and diverse Montana trail system in which liability concerns among managing agencies and private landowners are reduced.

10) COMMUNICATION, COORDINATION, INFORMATION, AND EDUCATION.

Explanation: In an era of tight budgets, managers will increasingly need to work more collaboratively with both each other and their constituents. Trail users would like improvements in a variety of trail-related information and education materials. As types of trail use and use levels increases, the likelihood of conflict increases. Improving trail ethics is an important concern that can be addressed by improved information and education.

Goal(s): 1) Improved trail-related communication, coordination, and mutual understanding within and between trail managing agencies, trail users, local governments, private landowners, tourism agencies, and other organizations and groups; 2) Trail users have ready access to trail-related information, maps, and signs; 3) Improved trail-related training and education opportunities in order to diminish conflicts, reduce resource impacts, and improve ethics and safety.

11) NEW LINEAR CORRIDOR ALTERNATIVES.

Explanation: Abandoned/underused railroad lines and utility corridors are examples of linear land ownership patterns offering potential for trails. These patterns occur throughout Montana, including areas where few other trail opportunities exist. Across the country, there has been an explosion of interest in utilizing old rail grades for trails, with thousands of miles of old rail bed converted to trail use over the last ten years; the rails-to-trails movement has become one

of the most notable trail success stories in the country. Unfortunately, Montana has lagged behind the leading rail-to-trail states, and has lost some exceptional opportunities as key rail lines have reverted to private use.

Goal: More effective trail-related use of Montana's existing linear corridors (e.g., rail trails, utility corridors, etc), which were originally laid out for non-recreational purposes.

12) ALTERNATIVE TRANSPORTATION.

Explanation: Providing safe, accessible alternatives to automobiles benefits individuals, society, and the environment. Trails encourage exercise and non-motorized commuting. This in turn provides mental and physical health benefits, a social outlet that unites neighborhoods and communities, and reduces congestion and air pollution associated with automobile use.

Goal: More non-motorized transportation trails, especially in urban areas. Trails need to be regarded as essential to a community's infrastructure as roads and sewers, not a luxury to be addressed after everything else is completed.

13) DISABLED AND ELDERLY ACCESS.

Explanation: Montana has a need for more trails and trail access for the elderly and disabled, especially in and around urban areas. Providing this type of access not only fulfills federal and state mandates, but promotes the health, welfare, and happiness of a large group of Montanans and visitors. As the population continues to age, this issue will become increasingly important.

Goal: A Montana trail system which offers a diversity of trail options for elderly and disabled trail users, with good information available on the opportunities.



14) TRAILHEADS.

Explanation: Trailheads should be planned, designed, and maintained to reflect the type and amount of use, and as an integral part of management. Facilities, road access, parking, and educational information should reflect the management goals of the trail, as well as accommodate use, educate users, protect resources, and reduce costs.

Goal: A Montana trail system which is marked by a strategically located and well-designed trailhead network, in which development is appropriate to the type and volume of use.

15) RESEARCH, PLANNING, AND DESIGN.

Explanation: As trail use increases and activities become more varied, the need for timely and accurate information on use, user preferences, conflicts, environmental impacts, and other pertinent information becomes increasingly important, as does the need for sharing of information among key agencies and individuals. Improved research, planning, and design can help alleviate conflict, protect resources, and provide a wide range of educational and recreational opportunities, in a safe and accessible manner.

Goal(s): 1) Research and data collection systems which efficiently gather and provide pertinent, timely, and accurate facts about trail use, conflicts, user preferences, environmental conditions, and other important information to the people who can utilize it; 2) Trail networks which are planned and designed to be interesting to travel, integrated with each other, and offer access to a wide range of other trail-related outdoor recreation activities, in geographically varied settings. Where practicable, trails should be integrated with interpretive and educational opportunities, and made accessible to the elderly and disabled (see accessibility section for more details).

Montana's Trails and Public Lands

Federal agencies manage 29 percent of the land base in Montana and 99 percent of the State's trail miles (see Figure E-1). Montana's ten national forests contain approximately 16.8 million acres of land, while the seven BLM field offices in Montana manage over eight million acres of land, mainly in the eastern and southwestern parts of the State. The National Park Service (NPS) administers six sites in Montana, including Glacier National Park, and a portion of Yellowstone National Park, totaling over one million acres. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages ten National Wildlife Refuges in Montana, as well as the National Bison Range, totaling more than 1,330,000 acres. Federal agencies also manage the designated units of the National Trail System in Montana (e.g., the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail).

At the time of the 1994 trail inventory, Montana contained 2,294 public trails, totaling more than 14,633 linear miles (ITRR 1994a). The U.S. Forest Service (FS) managed 2,075 trails (90 percent of Montana's total) and 13,496 trail miles (92 percent of total), concentrated in western Montana (see Table E-1). The National Park Service (NPS) managed 148 trails (six percent of State total), totaling 826 miles (six percent of total). In the inventory, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) accounted for only nine trails (less than one percent of total), totaling 167 miles (one percent of total miles); by 1999, the BLM reported 49 trails, totaling 397 miles. Finally, National Wildlife Refuges constitute an important part of Montana's federal lands, but offer relatively few formal trail opportunities (less than one percent of the trails and trail miles in Montana).

Although the majority of public lands and trails in Montana are managed by the federal government, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) manages over 400,000 acres of land throughout Montana, consisting of Wildlife Management





Areas, State Parks, and Fishing Access Sites. Additionally, FWP has purchased conservation and recreational easements on thousands of acres of private land in Montana. Most of FWP's formal trail opportunities are located in state parks. Overall, FWP manages less than one percent of the trails and trail miles in Montana (ITRR 1994a).

The State of Montana also owns 5.1 million acres of School Trust land, managed by the Trust Land Management Division, in the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). School Trust land generally consists of Sections 16 and 36 per township; in other cases these sections have been consolidated into larger parcels. Recreational use of school trust land was established in 1991, although trail use is informal. DNRC also owns a variety of recreation sites around the state associated with dams and reservoirs, some of which are leased and managed by FWP. At the time of the trails inventory, DNRC reported managing no formally designated trails.

Cities and counties reported managing one percent of the trails and less than one percent of the trail miles in Montana. Although none of the non-federal trail managing agencies or organizations in the inventory accounted for more than one percent of the State's total of either total trails or trail miles, they represent an important component of Montana's trail system, particularly trails closest to the urban areas where most Montanans live (ITRR 1994a).

Other trail managing entities in the statewide trails inventory included Indian reservations, the University of Montana, and private entities. Each of these categories totaled less than one percent of Montana's trails and trail miles (ITRR 1994a).

Table E-1: Montana's Trail Inventory

Agency	Number of Trails	<u>%</u>	Miles of Trails	<u>%</u>
USFS	2,075	90	13,496	92
National Park Service	148	6	826	6
Local Park and Rec. Depts.	28	1	60	<1
FWP	15	<1	28	<1
BLM	9*	<1	167*	1
USFWS	6	<1	5	<1
Univ. of MT	6	<1	21	<1
Indian Reservations	5	<1	6	<1
<u>Private</u>	<u>2</u>	<u><1</u>	<u>24</u>	<u>≤1</u>
Total	2,294	100	14,633	100

^{*} Note: Data compiled in 1994 (ITRR 1994a). Although the comparative values remain generally similar, actual numbers have changed since 1994; by 1999, for example, the BLM reported 49 trails, totaling 397 miles. The trails and trail miles in the local parks and recreation departments category have also likely increased substantially since 1994, but updated numbers have not been compiled. Indian reservations and private trails are significantly under-reported because of incomplete responses to the survey. Abbreviations are as follows: USFS is the U.S. Forest Service; FWP is Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks; BLM is Bureau of Land Management; USFWS is U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.





MAPS

In the Montana State Trails Plan, pages S-9 through S-10 contain map figures. Due to a constantly changing trail system, most of these maps are already outdated. The maps are intended to be general representations only and are not be be used as trail guides.

Map Index:

Figure E-1 Montana Trails





Trail Settings and Use Restrictions

The majority of Montana's trails occur in relatively natural and primitive settings, with a significant portion located on the roadless public lands that comprise 11 percent of the State. The framework used to evaluate trail settings included six categories, ranging on a continuum from urban to primitive. The categories are based on the recreational opportunities spectrum (ROS) classification system, which is widely used by recreation managers in the Forest Service and other federal land managing agencies. Trails in the primitive category are generally in roadless areas over 5,000 acres, with a high degree of naturalness and a low level of development (Zinser 1995). Trails listed in the urban category, on the other hand, comprise a very low percentage of the total, but they are extremely important because they tend to be among the most heavily used trails. A summary of the trail setting for Montana's trail system is as follows, based on the 1994 trails inventory and the ROS classification system:

Primitive non-motorized setting	27%
Semi-primitive non-motorized	26%
Semi-primitive motorized	8%
Roaded natural	18%
Rural	< 1%
Urban	1%

(Source: ITRR 1994a)

The majority of use restrictions on Montana trails pertain to motorized trail activities. Of the trail miles included in the 1994 trails inventory, 53 percent were explicitly closed to motorized trail use, falling in either the primitive or semi-primitive, non-motorized categories. While many of the remaining trail miles are open to motorized use, this is not true in all cases (e.g., urban trails tend to be non-motorized). In addition, there are seasonal and case-by-case

closures in areas that are generally open to motorized trail use.

The zones where the majority of motorized trail recreation occurs—roaded natural and semi-primitive motorized—includes 46 percent of the total Montana trail miles in the inventory. The inventory data on use restrictions supports this figure, indicated that ATV and motorcycle use is unrestricted on 1,045 trails, 46 percent of all Montana trails (ITRR 1994a). It is important to note that there have been significant changes in the type of restrictions since the inventory was completed (e.g., a 50 inch maximum width limit is now more typical on Forest Service land, for example, than the 40 inch rule common at the time of the inventory).

Under current federal policy, cross-country OHV use is often allowed, even in areas where designated trails and roads may be closed to motorized use. As of 2000, a joint Forest Service/BLM draft EIS is examining a variety of OHV management alternatives for Montana, North Dakota, and portions of South Dakota (USDA/USDOI 1999b).

Some of the other trail use restrictions which were derived from the 1994 trail inventory are as follows (ITRR 1994a):

- All motorized and mechanized (bicycles) vehicles are prohibited from 12 percent of trails (e.g., in designated wilderness areas).
- Bicycles are prohibited from 11 percent of statewide trails.
- Stock animals are restricted on 9 trails, less than one percent of the state total. It is possible that restrictions on stock animals and possibly bike use were under-represented in the inventory, for undetermined reasons.





Montana Trail Use Patterns

Two statewide studies were completed during the 1990s that were intended to obtain comparative information on the popularity of various types of trail-related activities among Montanans. The two studies summarized below were designed differently, which helps explain some of the differences in responses.

Trail-related Activities

Participation rates were obtained from *The Montana Trail User's Study* (ITRR 1994b), which surveyed adult Montanans about their involvement in pre-selected trail-related activities during a six-month period in 1994. The questions in the survey asked respondents whether they had engaged in the activity, but did not specify that it actually had to occur on a trail (e.g., walking could have occurred on a sidewalk, for example).

- 70.0 percent of adult Montanans went dayhiking or walking for pleasure, by far the most popular type of trail-related activity in Montana
- 20.2 percent bicycled (conventional)
- 19.6 percent went four-wheel driving
- 19.4 percent went jogging
- 17.5 percent went horseback riding
- 14.4 percent went backpacking
- 14.4 went cross-country skiing
- 14.4 percent went mountain biking
- 11.6 percent used ATVs
- 9.1 percent went off-road motorcycling

Another portion of this survey attempted to gauge what additional activities Montanans engaged in while on trail-related trips. According to the results, respondents said they did the following activities while on a recent, summer season (April 1-September 30) trail trip:

- 61.2 percent—wildlife viewing
- 44.1 percent—photography
- 40.8 percent—picnicking

- 24.0 percent—nature study
- 23.8 percent—fishing
- 23.8 percent—camping
- 14.5 percent—hunting
- 7.5 percent—swimming

Trail Use

Trail use rates were obtained from FWP's *Montanan's Assessment of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Programs* (1998), which asked respondents if they had used a trail during the previous two year period, and if so, what activities they engaged in. Unlike the 1994 survey, the questions were linked specifically to trail use, although "trail" was not explicitly defined.

Survey results indicated that 56 percent of adult Montanans had used a trail during the two-year sample period (FWP 1998). Of those trail users, participation by activity was as follows:

- 90 percent went hiking
- 11 percent went horseback riding
- 6 percent went bicycling
- 4 percent went cross-country skiing
- 2 percent used ATVs
- 2 percent used 4X4s
- 2 percent used off-road motorcycles

User Days

Another way of examining resident participation in trail-related activities are user days, which are based on the average number of days spent engaging in a specific activity. The average number of days participants engaged in various activities during the six-month sample period varied widely (ITRR 1994b):

- Jogging—20 days
- Walking and hiking—19 days
- Off-road motorcycling—9.5 days
- Horseback riding—9 days
- Mountain biking—9 days
- Cross-country skiing—5.5 days
- ATV—5 days
- Backpacking—4 days



Trends in State and National Trail-related Participation

The limited amount of available trends data suggests that most trail-related recreation is increasing in popularity among Montanans. Non-motorized trail activities such as walking, hiking, and cross-country skiing increased substantially since the 1960s, although horseback riding declined during the 1970s and 1980s (FWP 1993).

Off-highway vehicle registration trends in Montana also affirm the growing popularity of motorized trail activities. Between 1990 and 1998, for example, ATV and motorcycle registrations increased by 156 percent, rising from 7,399 to 18,953 (DOA/DOI 2000b). A survey conducted by University of Montana researchers estimated that 100 percent of registered ATVs and nine percent of registered motorcycles are used in off-highway situations (Sylvester 1995).

Truck registrations in Montana also increased between 1990 and 1998, although not nearly as dramatically as OHVs. During that period, registrations climbed 13 percent, rising from 268,466 to 304,696 (DOA/DOI 2000b). According to the University of Montana, approximately nine percent of trucks registered in Montana are used off-highway (Sylvester 1995).

Non-resident visitation data also suggest increased participation in trail activities. Montana attracted two and a half million more visitors in 1995 than in 1983 (ITRR 1997). Between 1990 and 1994, nonresident visitors to Montana increased by 30 percent, an annual average increase of six percent. By 1998, over nine million tourists visited Montana, many of whom participated in trail-related outdoor recreation. The small amount of data available on non-resident participation rates confirms the popularity of day/nature hiking by visitors to Montana. Over 30 percent of nonresident visitors to Montana National Forests participated in day/nature

hiking, and 5 percent went backpacking or mountain biking (ITRR 1991).

Nationally, outdoor recreation is exploding in popularity, with trail use and trail-related activities among the fastest growing categories of use. In 1995 over 94 percent of Americans participated in some form of outdoor recreation at least once, up from 89 percent in 1982-83 (Cordell, Teasley, and Super 1997).

Hiking, among the most popular trail-related outdoor activities, is also among the fastest growing in the country, with over 47.5 million participants in 1994, a 94 percent increase since 1984 (Cordell, Teasley, and Super 1997). Off-highway driving grew by 44 percent, with over 24.5 million participants by 1994. Mountain bike use has also grown explosively at the national level, while cross-country skiing has grown at slower rates, and horseback riding has experienced declines in participation.

Other outdoor activities engaged in by millions of Americans that often involve trail use include hunting, fishing, and nature watching. Slight declines in the total number of hunting and fishing participants were more than made up for by the 54 million Americans engaged in bird watching by 1994, a 155 percent increase since 1982. Outdoor adventure sports such as rock climbing, ice climbing, back country skiing and snowboarding, are also experiencing rapid gains in participants, many of whom use trails as travel routes to desirable recreation sites.

Trail User Attitudes

The following section summarizes Montana trail user attitudes on a number of significant issues, including trail supply, access to trails, trail use and management, conflict and compatibility, and trail preference (ITRR 1994b and FWP 1998). It is worth noting that while the 1994 and 1998 surveys referenced here represent some of the best and most comprehensive information available about Montana trail user attitudes, the 1994 data, in particular, is increasingly dated. It





is impossible to say conclusively how some of the attitudes may have changed over time without doing another survey, but it would seem reasonable to assume that conflicts between different types of users have increased since then.

Attitudes About Montana's Trail Supply <u>Need For More Trails Statewide</u>

- 20 percent of respondents in the Montana Trail Users Study (1994b) indicated that there were enough trails in the state.
- 43 percent of respondents felt there were not enough trails.
- 36 percent of respondents were either neutral or didn't know.

Need For More Trails Locally

- Nearly 50 percent of respondents agreed that more trails were needed in their communities, compared to 20 percent that disagreed. Strong support for urban trails, alternative transportation and commuter routes, and greenways was also expressed during the Plan public scoping period.
- Strong support was expressed for increasing trails near urban areas, including quiet, nonmotorized trails.

Rail-Trails

Nearly 69 percent of respondents supported using abandoned railroad grades as trails, with five percent opposed.

Access to Trails and Public Land

Access to trails and public land was the most often identified statewide trail issue during the public scoping period, as well as the second most often identified local trail issue.

Conversely, only 14 percent of Montana residents reported being dissatisfied with access to public land for recreation in the 1994 survey, while 79 percent indicated they were satisfied.

Attitudes About Trail Use and Management

In general, Montanans are satisfied with their most recent trail experiences, with 95 percent expressing satisfaction, four percent dissatisfied, and only one percent with no opinion. However, many trail users have strong opinions on trail use and management, as summarized below (ITRR 1994b and FWP 1998).

Crowding

Montana trail users have some sense of being crowded while using trails, but from a statewide perspective the situation does not yet appear to be at a crisis level. For example, 24 percent of the respondents in the 1994 survey agreed that too many people are using their favorite trails, 30 percent disagreed, with 46 percent either neutral or having no opinion. The survey was not designed to identify particular trails or locations where there may be severe localized crowding.

Trail Preference

- A majority of the respondents in most of the trail user categories expressed a preference for "backcountry" trails, including 60 percent of the largest group of trail users—walkers and dayhikers. (It is important to stress that while there is a high preference for backcountry trails, urban trails are more likely to get heavily used because of their close proximity to where people live. The need for more urban trails was mentioned frequently during the scoping period.)
- Approximately 62 percent of the crosscountry skiers preferred groomed trails.
- During the Plan scoping period, preserving quiet, non-motorized trail opportunities was one of the most important issues, with 216 of



- the 315 (69 percent) of the written comments addressing this perspective.
- Alternatively, strong support for keeping existing motorized trails open was expressed during the eighteen public scoping meetings held in cities throughout the state.

Trail Etiquette

 51 percent of Montana trail users agreed that poor trail etiquette is a problem, 19 percent disagreed, and 30 percent were neutral or didn't know.

Trail Information

• 55 percent of respondents felt trail location information could be improved, 19 percent of the respondents disagreed, while 26 percent were neutral or didn't know.

Attitudes About Conflict and Compatibility

While conflicts between trail users do not appear to be especially severe when examined from a statewide perspective, the perceived lack of compatibility between motorized and non-motorized users, in particular, suggests a potential for much greater conflict in the future if use levels continue to increase, and trail supply and management remain relatively constant. In Montana, the expressed lack of compatibility between motorized and non-motorized trail users has likely not yet led to greater conflicts due to the state's numerous trail opportunities and low population.

Results from the 1994 and 1998 surveys are summarized below (ITRR 1994b and FWP 1998):

Conflict

In general, trail users expressed some concern about conflicts on trails, but there was not strong agreement on the severity of the problem.

- 35 percent of the respondents agreed that conflicts between users occurred on their local trails, 24 percent disagreed, and 41 percent were neutral or didn't know.
- 45 percent agreed that trail conflicts were relatively minor, 15 percent disagreed, 40 percent had no opinion or didn't know.
- Over 9 percent of the responding trail users reported experiencing some sort of conflict on their last trail trip.
- Of those reporting conflicts, nearly 80
 percent said they involved mechanized forms
 of trail use (this includes motorized and nonmotorized uses such as mountain bikes).

Compatibility

- In general, Montanans have relatively strong opinions about motorized trail use: 28 percent of Montanans strongly disapproved of legal motorized trail use, 13 percent disapproved, 22 percent strongly approved, 31 percent somewhat approved, and 6 percent had no opinion.
- Survey results indicate that non-motorized users do not find motorized uses to be compatible with their type of trail activities. The percentage of non-motorized users who felt motorized use was compatible with their activity never climbed above 25 percent.
- Only 12 percent of backpackers felt motorcycles or four-wheel vehicles were compatible with their types of trail activity.
- In a break from the overall trend, 25 percent of the cross-country skiers felt snowmobiling was a compatible activity. Interestingly, fewer than 13 percent of snowmobilers said cross-country skiing was compatible with snowmobiling.
- Motorized users who felt non-motorized uses were compatible, ranged between 25 percent and 60 percent, depending on type of motorized use.
- Horseback riders generally feel non-mechanized trail use is more compatible with their sport than mechanized uses. For example, 72 percent of respondents rated walking as compatible, but only 33 percent felt similarly about mountain biking.
- Motorized vehicles were judged to be even less compatible; only 16 to 18 percent of





horseback riders felt motorized uses were compatible.

Trail Funding

Funding for new trail maintenance and construction is a critical Montana trail issue. Trends during the 1990s indicated decreasing federal funding for trail construction and maintenance in Montana, with a growing backlog of maintenance needs. Forest Service estimates show that maintenance funding decreased approximately twenty percent from fiscal year (FY) 1995 to FY 1997, for example, with construction funds decreasing by approximately forty percent during the same period. Limited federal funding is the primary factor preventing agencies from reaching their trail-related goals.

A number of federal, state, local, and private sources of funding and assistance are available to governments and private organizations. Private sources of trail funds include non-profit organizations, as well as corporate and business sponsors. Federal programs constitute the largest funding source for trails in Montana; some are specifically dedicated to trails, while others are primarily aimed at reducing pollution, promoting alternative transportation, preserving open space, or protecting natural resources. The most important programs were created by the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA 21); these include the Surface Transportation Program, the National Recreational Trails Program, and the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program (CMAQ). Other programs include Community Development Block Grants, the Entitlement Program, and the Small Cities Program.

The Parks Division of FWP administers three trail grant programs: The federally-funded Recreational Trails Program (RTP), which funds both motorized and non-motorized projects; the state-funded Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) Program; and the Snowmobile Grant Program. A much more detailed description and analysis of

the State RTP and OHV Grant Programs is found in the later in the *Trails Plan*, and especially in the *Trails Program PEIS*.

Montana Trail Supply and Demand

Montana's trail supply has not kept pace with increased use. Additionally, growth in population and tourism, combined with expanding participation in outdoor recreation, is putting pressure on the current trail system and increasing the demand for more trail opportunities.

Amidst this growing demand, Montana's overall supply of trails has declined, with trail creation eclipsed by the loss of existing trails. This decline has occurred mainly in the backcountry, due road building, logging, abandonment, lack of maintenance and other factors. Between 1945 and the late 1990s, at least 9,000 miles of trails disappeared in the national forests of Montana, as forest system road miles climbed from an estimated 8,600 miles to approximately 32,900 miles (Madej 1988 and USFS 1997). While some of these trails were not originally built specifically for recreational purposes, they still represent a net loss of recreational opportunity. In addition to this trend, there has also been a loss of opportunities for motorized trail users during the past decade, as trails and roads are closed to these types of uses to protect resources and reduce social conflicts.

During the past ten years, there has been growing interest in providing more trails in Montana's urban areas, where a significant portion of the State's residents reside. Changes in land ownership and land use have often resulted in subdivisions, suburban sprawl, different attitudes, and a changing sense of community. One consequence of this has been a loss of unofficial (often privately owned) trails and access to adjacent public lands, especially in the rapidly growing counties concentrated in western Montana. Conversely, funding for and interest in urban trails has



increased during the last decade, and there have been some spectacular success stories throughout Montana.

Although Montana trail users generally prefer more primitive settings when they have time to get away from home, they tend to use urban trails on an every-day basis, which results in heavy, regular use. An ideal situation—and one that is emerging in a number of Montana cities—is a well-developed urban trail system, with good connecting links to more primitive trail systems on surrounding federal lands. In both urban and rural parts of Montana, the majority of the demand is for non-motorized trails, although motorized use has been increasing rapidly as well, with motorized users facing a diminished range of opportunities due to environmental concerns and social conflicts.

Geographically, eastern Montana has comparatively few trail opportunities. In addition to providing recreational opportunities for local residents, more trails in eastern Montana would help support efforts by some communities in this part of the state to increase tourism.

View from the End of the Trail

There is a considerable amount of information to digest in the *State Trails Plan*, and many recommendations that form a general map for Montana's trails future. It is up to trail users, organizations, and managers to sort through what is presented, and apply recommendations they feel will be helpful. From the perspective of FWP's involvement in trails, the main implementation vehicle for the Plan is the State Trails Grant Program; based on what is in this Plan,

recommended changes to the Program are detailed in the Trails Program PEIS.

As with many other things that generate passion, Montana's trails also produce disagreement, sometimes leading to conflict and controversy. It is worth reminding ourselves that disagreement is natural, entirely American, very Montanan, and even healthy—if done respectfully with an ear toward listening and learning. That is the spirit we hope this Plan approaches its subject. It is unlikely many people will agree with everything in this document, but there should be a fair amount that is common ground. So, in your tour through Montana's trail system, please do disagree and debate, but don't forget all that is shared and how lucky we are to share it, in the context of a political system that allows for and even encourages differences in perspective.

When all is said and done, there are a number of philosophical themes woven through the Plan that are worth stating explicitly:

- In spite of their differences, trail users will accomplish far more working together than separately.
- With a growing and increasingly diverse number of people using trails, the need for respect toward resources and other users is even greater than in the past.
- All trail users have a place somewhere on the system. We must accept that every use won't necessarily be allowed everywhere, but that all the uses covered by this plan are legitimate trail-related activities.
- There are a growing number of trails success stories throughout Montana; be inspired by what others have accomplished, and build on their good work in your area.
- Finally, don't ever forget that trails are supposed to be fun, and that trail users of all types, sizes, and shapes are generally fun people to be around, and are on the trail for many of the same reasons you are. Go out and enjoy Montana's great trails!



